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Peer Interactions: Same-Age Interactions of Students with Developmental Disabilities

by

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Education and Human Development of

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Abstract

With the contemporary call for inclusive education, educators and parents are seeking to provide equal opportunities for students in and outside of the classroom. The students who are ignored are those who are enrolled in “life skills” courses that remove them from mainstream education. In this removal, these students are unable to build peer-relationships with students of their own age. These interactions are not only critical to the well-being of the communities at large, but also the rights and responsibilities to providing all types of students with an opportunity to make social connections with students of their own age. Through personal interviews with parents who have enrolled their children with developmental disabilities in an after-school program to enhance the children’s social skills, this study shows the essential role that same-age interactions play in the lives of students with developmental disabilities.

Chapter One: Introduction

The teaching and fostering of social skills for students with developmental disabilities has been a struggle for teachers in all communities. As a key factor in the disability itself, the development of social skills for students of varying levels and extremity of developmental disorder without a doubt are in some type of need to improve social skills.

It has been considered then, that there is a high need for students with developmental disabilities to be involved in outside of school activities that increase social awareness (McNulty, & Quaglia, 2007). Regardless of the amount of time and practice that is spent at home as parents work with these students, there has recently been a massive call for the communities growing up around these students to also play a role in their lives (Giangreco, 2007). As education is moved to an inclusion model within classroom, the towns and communities at large have also embraced the notion of highlighting all students strengths, and provided them with as many opportunities as can be afforded (Giangreco, 2007).

Studies have shown specifically that the community awareness and openness to having extracurricular activities both in and outside of school can result in the vast improvement of social skills development in students with developmental disabilities (McNulty, & Quaglia, 2007). In fact, very often it is decided and encouraged during meetings (Committee on Special Education) for students with disabilities that are removed the student from the “mainstream” setting that those students should be involved in an activity outside of school. By involving all members of the community in these outside of school activities, there is a benefit for the students, who can develop and refine

his or her social skills, and also for the community at large—a notion that is essential when considering the inclusion model. Everyone can learn something from others, and the results of building this type of understanding allows all members of the community to develop at their best.

Problem Statement

As much as these factors are important, it is also absolutely essential to consider that a student with developmental disabilities needs to seek out opportunities to interact with students of their own age. Although many community programs do encourage all students' participation, many of them tend to lose sight of the fact that it is vital for students with developmental disabilities to have the chance to be surrounded with peers in their age group.

The purpose for my research was to highlight the need to include students from mainstream schooling into outside of school activities where they interact with students who are not in their schools. The students with developmental disabilities most often would be enrolled in a life skills educational setting that helps students develop the skills that are necessary to survive in their world. One area that cannot be truly accounted for in these studies is interaction with students of their own age. It is almost impossible to foster these relationships in schooling for these students, and as my research reveals, many of these students are craving some sort of connection with their peers (Carter, 2011).

Significance

The importance of this research had to do with finding a way to reach all students in school. As a student teacher and frequent volunteer in the Together Including Every student (T.I.E.S.) organization, I have witnessed first -hand the absolute need for students

with developmental disabilities to connect with their peers. There is a high level of frustration for some students who are not within the mainstream school setting in making connections appropriately. These students have the ability to care and want, and to be a part of a human connection that I feel many students often take for granted: acceptance. There are very few better ways to establish any level of acceptance if the students with developmental disabilities never have the opportunity to be with students of their own age.

In order to measure the level and development of social awareness, and to establish whether the students who were involved in a program T.I.E.S that is based in the notion that same-age peers are essential to acceptance and social development, I decided to interview parents. As consistent and frequent parts of these student's lives, these parents (some of whom were new to the program, and others who were veterans) discussed in individual interviews the changes that they had noticed in their children while involved in this program.

My hypothesis before conducting this research was that the students who were involved in the outside of school activities would, according to their parents, experience better opportunities to practice their social skills, and that parents would notice this improvement at home. Also, I believed that the parents who I interviewed would feel that their children made stronger and more "real" connections to other students of their own age.

This need and underestimated desire for acceptance is an idea that has been researched largely by many schools and organizations. These same-age interactions are key components to the development of a healthy individual, regardless of whether they

have been diagnosed with a developmental disability or not. These connections are without a doubt being called for, as seen by the research of school and communities, in order to create a more inclusive and open-minded community.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In 21st century schools are leaning and pushing for an inclusion model within their districts, there has also been a larger call for communities to embrace this notion. As a result, many studies and research have been dedicated to showing the positive results of outside of school social development for students with developmental disabilities (Baxter, 1997).

The passing of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) has resulted in the academic standards for student to be increased significantly overall. This has been an extremely new and important notion in the world of special education in that the students, who are enrolled in school, regardless of where they might be placed, are held to standards that include everyone. Within New York State, there are also specific legislations and assessments in order to meet the needs of students who are in outside of school placements. Students in life skills studies often times will be assessed in New York State through the alternative assessment process. This is one that requires teachers and students to develop portfolios of their student's work, which is then graded at a state level during the school year.

Public Law 94-142 (1975) also recognizes and supports the need for all students, including those with disabilities, to be somehow included in regular education settings. The law states that all school districts should require:

“..that to a maximum extent appropriate, handicapped children, including those in public and private institutions or other care facilities are educated with children who are not handicapped... (section 612 (5) B of P.L 94-142).

This law then brings up an interesting notion: how can students who academically have already been separated from their peers still maintain some form of interaction or portion of their education with other students of their own age? The answer lies directly in outside of school activities, which have shown significantly positive effects in the areas of social development for students with developmental disabilities.

The Call for Extracurricular Activities

Students with developmental disabilities such as Autism, very often struggle in the area of social development. This struggle often times is not one that is always improved upon when working solely with other students in a classroom who are diagnosed with the same disability. In fact, it is often found that students with developmental disabilities that only maintain relationships or contact with classmates in a “life skills” setting may even regress greatly in the areas of social development (Orsmond, Krauss, and Seltzer, 2004).

By being restricted to only involve themselves with students who are in their classroom, students with developmental disabilities are not only not improving their social skills, but are showing significant signs of regression that may match their peers within that class (Bentley, 2008). In doing so, they are creating serious disservice to these students, who are meant to be maintaining a high level of education and engagement with other students in an educational setting.

In fact, the naturalistic model that is used in many pre-school classrooms to enhance and develop social skills has shown a significant improvement for students with developmental disabilities (Kok, Kong, & Bernard-Opitz, 2002). There is a clear indication that the naturalistic version, or the process by which teachers and other

education professionals remain outside of social instruction during play in a preschool, works best for younger students (Kok, Kong, & Bernard-Opitz, 2002). When students with developmental disabilities in a preschool setting have the chance to be surrounded by, and play with, students who have not been diagnosed with any developmental disabilities, there is noticeable difference in what is considered SGD's (Speech Generating Devices) in students with developmental disabilities. The students begin to make a higher level of eye contact with their peers, and will often engage in some type of age-level play during free time. In addition, these students show an improved ability to use some degree of spoken word appropriately in the classroom, and can participate in large-group activities at a higher rate (Trembath, et al., 2009).

Therefore, even in the beginning stages of development, being surrounded by and consistently involved with students of their own age group helps increase levels of essential social skills for preschool aged students (Kok, Kong, & Bernard-Opitz, 2002). The key being, of course, that the normally developing students have the natural ability to set a type of model that is imitated by the students with developmental disabilities. Over time and with practice, these students are vastly improving, where students who are surrounded with only other students with developmental disabilities show a large amount of regression, and an extremely low level of improvement overall (Kok, Kong, & Bernard-Opitz, 2002).

Although it is at some times assumed that students with developmental disabilities would not want to, or even could not be involved in these activities, it is an essential part of growing up and experiences for all students. Spending time in extracurricular activities allows for all students to develop interests outside of school, experience and test those

interests, and gain practice in the social skills that are used in daily life (Sweden, Carter, & Molfenter, 2010). Maintaining social skills is a result that becomes relatively secondary then, to the first essential factor of helping a student be a part of their community, and the best individual that they could possibly be.

In order to reach as many students as possible, teachers would need to work toward making it clear to the students with developmental disabilities and their families what possible activities that encourage social development are available for each district. One method that can be used is called “Opportunity Mapping.” This process involves creating a checklist for students or parents to complete that help streamline and clarify what the student likes best. Questions are asked to lead families to activities that best match the student’s wants and needs. All the activities on the opportunity map would encourage peer involvement, and would include students of varied ability. These maps would help in choosing an appropriate activity for parents, and also give the student a large amount of choice in what they want to do. This way, not only are social connections fostered among these students, but these connections are made easier because each student is highly interested and involved in whatever the activity may be (Sweden, Carter, & Molfenter, 2010).

A simple method of reasonable direction can therefore result in better defining an activity that is a good fit for each individual student. The call for students to be involved in extracurricular activities is so essential currently, that there are many proposals and notions to best streamline the process itself within communities. This idea speaks largely to the idea that communities are moving more toward an inclusion model themselves. In

embracing all people, all students, and all families, many communities across the country are seeking to better themselves.

Considerations: Students with Siblings

For students with developmental disabilities, there is a clear need for the consideration of whether or not the student has siblings that are around their same age level. The assumption would be that students who have siblings that are within about two years of age apart would have some type of effect on the development of social skills (Kaminsky, & Dewey, 2001). This is absolutely the case.

Students with developmental disabilities have a tendency to regress when surrounded by a younger sibling whose behavior may be less mature. There is significant evidence that students who otherwise would function socially at a higher level will typically regress at home until their normally developing sibling has passed the highest level of social development that has been reached (Kaminsky, & Dewey, 2001).

Therefore, when students with developmental disabilities with younger siblings are working through social issues at home, many parents may report that the student seems to function at a level that is not much higher than the younger sibling. However, the interactions between siblings become highly beneficial once the normally developing sibling has passed their sibling's established plateau point (Hastings, 2003).

This notion is essential to consider when looking at the positive peer interactions of students with developmental disabilities. If every student was an only-child in studies, then the development of the social skills in the outside of school activities could also be a result of the advantages of having a sibling at home who is older than the student in question. Furthermore, any lack of progress in social skills could be a result of having a

younger sibling at home as well. However, regardless of the effects on the specific studies completed, what remains is that same-age interactions have a highly significant impact on the development of social skills (Kaminsky, & Dewey, 2001). The sibling factor is one that is absolutely worth consideration, but one that also only reinforces the importance of positive same-age peer interactions for students with developmental disabilities.

Current Methods

There are many methods that are being used as extracurricular activities currently within the classroom. Many of these are used to improve social skills, but they tend to not follow the more naturalistic method that is working well in some pre-school areas. The current uses of social skills practice are always based in contrived situations. These social problems and issues involve role-play with an adult inside or outside the classroom and help students who struggle with social skills work through different social issues (Bentley, 2008). In these situations, students are purposely placed in a social situation that they would feel awkward or uncomfortable and are encouraged to go through a given set of steps that have been practiced and taught over time.

These situations often times revolve around an activity that may take the student outside of school. Students may take trips to a restaurant, gas station, or any other place of business to practice needed social interaction skills (Bentley, 2008). However, these interactions are always structured, and rarely allow for any real type of peer-level discussion or interaction. Although they are also essential for successful living and life skills for these students, they do not account for the social aspect of society. Being able to

properly purchase and item at a store is absolutely a skill that students need to work through, but they also need to be able to develop connections with their peers.

Another method that is being used for the development of social skills is using parent-supervised activities. In these outside of school functions, students are able to be surrounded by other peers who also have developmental disabilities and are partnered with their parents to complete different projects or skills (Bentley, 2008). In order to build team-building and practice taking steps to complete a goal, students are able to practice their communication skills in working on one united goal, while being supervised by a parent and a team-leader (or a teacher). These situations encourage social interactions and problem solving among students with developmental disabilities and are again relatively contrived in nature. The problems that are created are purposely difficult for based on the strengths and weaknesses of each student, and working through the problems in order to accomplish a goal (such as baking a cake as a team) are all vital life skills for these students (Bentley, 2008).

Still, these methods also do not account for peer relationships among students with disabilities and student without disabilities within the same peer-group. Problem solving and team work skills are very important and essential to practice and work through, but they are not naturalistic or socially relevant situations for all students. Furthermore, the parent supervision in these methods adds an extra safeguard and level of comfort for a student that does not exist when students are challenged to make connections with other peers on their own.

The current methods and research that is being completed supports the idea of peer-based interactions, and also offers solutions that do cover some areas of social

development, but tend to leave out the peer-based interactions that are so vital. In addition, the current research tends to leave out the factor of being within the same age group, in order to establish relevant social relationships. The study that was completed instead focuses on a naturalistic encouragement of same-age interactions among peers with and without developmental disabilities.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The methods that were used in this research project allowed for a developing idea of parent notions of their child's success when enrolled in an extracurricular program that encourages same-age peer interactions. The parents that were interviewed varied from those who had been enrolled in the program for years, as well as those who were brand new to the program.

Purpose

The purpose of this research was to investigate the parental perceptions of the impact that students without any developmental disabilities interacting with those who do in an outside of school activity on a consistent basis could possibly help students overall in the area of social development.

Objective

The objective of this project is to interview parents whose children are enrolled in extracurricular activities that encourage same-age peer groups with students with developmental disabilities.

Participants

The human subjects involved in this project were parents of children with developmental disabilities from ages 7 to 20 who have taken part in an extracurricular activity with the "Together Including Every Student" (T.I.E.S.) program through a local School district, which was founded on the ideas that peer-interactions between students with and without developmental disabilities are essential to the social development of all students. The students participate in various activities, and the one that I completed my research in was the African Drumming Circle on Friday evenings.

The students without developmental disabilities are specifically chosen from various high schools local to the Western New York area and are assigned to a different student with developmental disabilities who is within their age level. The parents bring their children to the drum circle, and then are asked to leave the room while the drumming goes on for approximately one hour.

Research Procedure

I completed interviews with parents during the time that they were waiting for their children to be done with drum circle. The parents were interviewed to see if they had seen improvement throughout the years, why they included their students in such activities, and how they feel it connected to the larger school system. The nature of the interview was during the time when their students are taking part in one of the extracurricular activities, which will be an organized drumming circle that is monitored by other volunteers and the coordinator of the program, Lisa Mahoney. Each parent who showed interest in the research and agreed to participate in it was taken into a separate room that is down the hall from the area where drum circle takes place and asked a series of questions while the primary researcher takes notes throughout the interview.

Each interview took about 10 to 15 minutes each, and encouraged the parents to give as much detail and examples for each question asked. The parents were informed of the purpose and objectives of the research before answering any questions, and were encouraged to ask questions about any section of the interview or process at any time. During the interview, I asked for anecdotes and examples that supported the way that the parents feel.

After the interviews were completed, the answers from each parent were carefully considered in order to answer the research question. The answers were then evaluated to see if there were any generalizations that could be made based on the results of the interview questions. For example, could the researcher, based on the information found, justify that there are social improvements in peer-related activities? In order to answer such a question, and make any generalizations, at least 12 out of the 15 interviews conducted would show a positive statement in answering the various questions.

In receiving as many details for each question as possible, I was able to gage for each question whether the response was positive or negative overall. Positive responses were considered those that supported the idea of encouraging peer-level interactions in various ways. By using the method of interview to complete this research, I was able to really experience and discuss the questions that I created, and also have numerous answers that included supporting details that were specific to each family and student.

The parents that were interviewed were removed from the group, and in doing so were able and comfortable to express their opinions on the program without any supervisors or coordinators of the program around them. Furthermore, the encouragement of including an anecdote resulted in gaining largely an inside perspective on what the parents felt were the results of the program. The results of this research show that the conversation that happened as a result of encouraging anecdotes not only showed stronger responses from parents, but also opened new areas of thought that the research didn't even truly think to encounter.

Chapter Four: Results, Application, Discussion

The results of this research were extremely positive overall. After completing the research, it was frequently found that parents had a positive response to the interview questions, which showed that they were aware that their children were working with same-age peers, and that these relationships and experiences helped build and improve their children's success in social skills.

Results

The purpose of this research was to investigate the parental perceptions of the impact that students without any developmental disabilities interacting with those who do in an outside of school activity on a consistent basis could possibly help students overall in the area of social development.

The first question that parents were asked during this interview was, "How old is your son or daughter?" The responses ranged from twelve to nineteen years of age for the students who participated. This number was considered by the T.I.E.S. Coordinator, and the volunteers in the drum circle also ranged from aged fifteen to twenty-one in order to encourage the idea of developing peer relationships.

The second question that was asked in the interview was, "Why did you enroll your child in the T.I.E.S Program?" 15 out of 15 parents had a positive response to this question, which was an answer that included in some way a mentioning of the peer-relationships that they felt their children wanted to develop in their time during the program. In fact, all of the parents agreed even went further to show their child's craving for same-age peer interactions:

“I enrolled Jeff* in this program because he has been having a hard time in school making friends. He comes home on a daily basis and complains that although his classmates are ‘nice,’ he cannot connect with them. After reading about T.I.E.S. and hearing other parents talk about how the students have a chance to work with kids their own age—I couldn’t resist!”

Another question that received extremely high responses was question three, “What changes have you noticed in your child since s/he started taking part in this program?” A positive response was considered one that included phrases that mention improvement in social behaviors (eye contact, speaking more frequently, proximity improvement during conversations), making friends, or working as a team. This question resulted in an overall generalized positive response, in that 14 out of 15 parents, or 93% of parents had those phrases in their responses during the interview. Some examples of the positive responses that were given during the interview include:

“I have noticed large changes in John* throughout his time in T.I.E.S. He is working better with his peers, and is making better eye contact with me at home, which was a large struggle for us. He is also able to share with the volunteers some of his hobbies that I can’t really relate to, like playing video games.”

“I have noticed that Anna* is much less shy than she was before starting this program. She is much more confident, and less afraid to approach a person of her own age and ask them if they want to share a drum. She is also much more expressive and willing to dance and sing along to the drumming music, where she would have only done that at home before being involved with T.I.E.S.”

In examining the generalizations that were made, 14 out of 15 parents responded positively to the question number four, “What do you notice about the volunteers in this program?” The positive response to this question would have included in some way that the parent noticed that all of the volunteers were relatively close in age to their child. By establishing that all of the parents who had their children involved in this program were aware of the fact that all of the volunteers were close in age shows that this is a motive for being involved in the T.I.E.S. Program. Therefore, there is an active choice for these parents to encourage and embrace same-age interactions for their children.

Question number five during the parent interview asked, “Does your child have any siblings?”, to which the parents interviewed had a wide variety of responses. Overall, 12 out of 15 parents said that their child did not have siblings, and when asked to expand mentioned that this was a possible reason for enrolling their child in the T.I.E.S. Program. One parent mentioned,

“Anna* doesn’t have any brothers or sisters, in fact, she doesn’t even have any cousins that are near her age. This means that most of her social interactions are with her father and myself or with adults in her life. I felt that she was truly missing something in her life that I had—even as an only child myself. That’s another reason why she was enrolled in T.I.E.S., she should have the opportunity to make friends of her own age too.”

In addition, 14 out of 15 parents, or 93%, responded positively to question number six, “Does your child seem to benefit from the interaction that s/he gets with other children of the same general age group?” A positive response to this answer included a variety of phrases, such as any mention of friendship, differences between

relationships inside of school and outside of school, or making relevant connections to children of their own age. Examples of positive responses to this question included answers that mentioned that their daughter:

“ ..is always thrilled to come to drum circle because she feels this is where her friends are. She doesn’t have the opportunity to make connections like these when she is in school because she is surrounded by adults.”

Another parent’s positive response to the same question was that their son “..wants to come to drum circle every Friday because the volunteers make him feel at home. He is always most concerned that there will be enough people at drum circle, and refers to every participant and his personal friend—which is a first for him!”

When answering question seven, 15 out of 15 parents responded positively to, “Why do you believe your child continues to participate in this program?” All parents listed and included details in their personal stories about a significant change socially in their children. In addition, many parents included the positive response phrases like “a strong desire to return,” “my child has made friends in this program,” or any others that were similar to those. Some of their responses included:

“Joe* wants to come back every week to drum circle, and every new semester for that matter, because he has made friends during his time here. He feels like he is part of a very fun and exciting new crowd, where he can laugh and play.”

“Abby* wants to return every week because she has a new story to share. She is always saving up certain events or stories that she knows her ‘T.I.E.S. Buddy’

will find it entertaining. She keeps coming back because of her social connections.”

The final interview question that was asked was, “Would you suggest to other parents that involvement in a program like T.I.E.S. is beneficial? Why or why not?” Since this was an opinion-based question, the positive responses overall had a wide range of possibilities. Any answer that again mentioned that same-age interactions were vital, and mentioning of friend-making and social connections were all considered to be a positive response. 15 out of 15 parents all responded with positive remarks for other parents who were considering T.I.E.S. Some of their responses included:

“I would tell another parent to take the risk and let their child give this a try. The volunteers are all so patient and excited to have a chance to work with these kids, and the social aspect of this program has made my son grow up before my eyes!”

“There is no question that parents should enroll their kids in this program. It is such a great idea, and it seems to be working for all of us. My family has become part of this program, and every time we watch another volunteer grow, we feel like we are watching a son or daughter of our own graduate. It is such a great feeling to belong somewhere for my daughter!”

There is a clear indication that the parents of the students who are involved within the T.I.E.S. Program notice significant and exciting changes in their children the longer they participate in activities that foster growth in the areas of social development. Not only did most parents respond positively to all of the questions that pertain to the idea of growth in the area of social development, but their narratives also provide massive insight

into what these parents that were involved in this research actually experienced: positive peer interactions that are relatable to their children.

Significance of the Study

As educators, a fundamental goal that is consistently maintained, as well as mandated by law, is to allow for every student to experience every facet of their abilities. This is managed by being sure that every intervention, alternative educational plan, or other technique that is used is one that is the least restrictive on a student. This can simply not be accomplished for students who are enrolled in “life skills” studies that remove them from mainstream districts. A viable solution to providing these students with the practice and development of the social skills that they will need is providing as many extracurricular activities for these students as possible.

Furthermore, if these opportunities outside of school can include students that are within the same age group, the results come back in a largely positive. This research shows that not only are students with developmental disabilities able to benefit from this type of setting, they are also craving a sense of belonging, at times, with their peers. Shy students became less afraid to be outgoing and fun, and students who did not feel as if they had connections with students at school are able to create those friendships with other students that are the same age.

Educators are always looking for ways to make school relatable to their students. We make connections to current events, high school sports games, and popular culture in a desperate attempt to spark interest in just a few. Why then, is such an easy method of creating that spark for students who are craving social connection so often underestimated. Students of all levels of abilities can learn from one another, and build

from one another. The research that was conducted here is a clear indicator of that notion, and a serious call for more of these volunteer opportunities to be made available in schools.

Areas for Further Study

This research develops a forum to allow for greater detailed research concerning peer-age level interactions between students with varying levels of abilities. First, there should be a more detailed study of students who are enrolled in a “self-contained” classroom setting in schools. This research project did not look into how improved social interactions with other same-age peers outside of school effects actual academic scores. In addition, the way in which students are assessed in “life skills” programs were not considered within this study, which could also be looked into with greater detail to show any effect on academic achievement for all students.

Another area that was not considered in this research project was any detailed look at the effects the social characteristics and development of children who are the siblings of a child with a developmental disability. Although this research project did briefly investigate and consider the possible effects of having a sibling would have on the child with developmental disabilities, the opposite effects certainly were not considered.

The research that was conducted proves largely that according to parents, there is a strong need and positive result for students with developmental disabilities when working with peers of their own age group. There is a significant need for this realization among educators and communities that all people require and wish to have to some degree, acceptance among their peer groups. To ignore this need is doing a clear disservice to all individuals, regardless of their developmental level or need. In order to

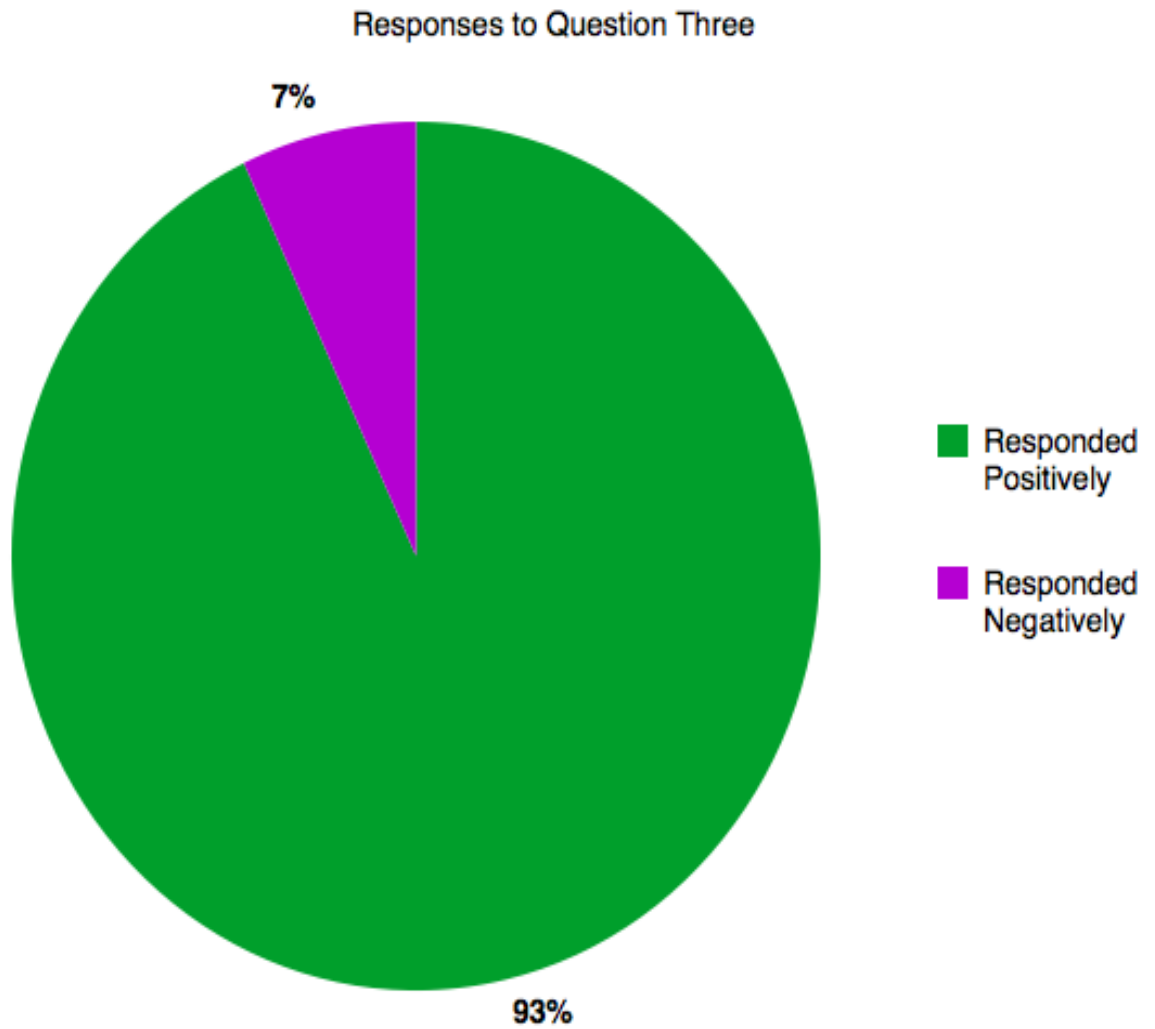
build an inclusive community, and to educate children in such a manner, these needs have to be met, and no longer pushed aside.

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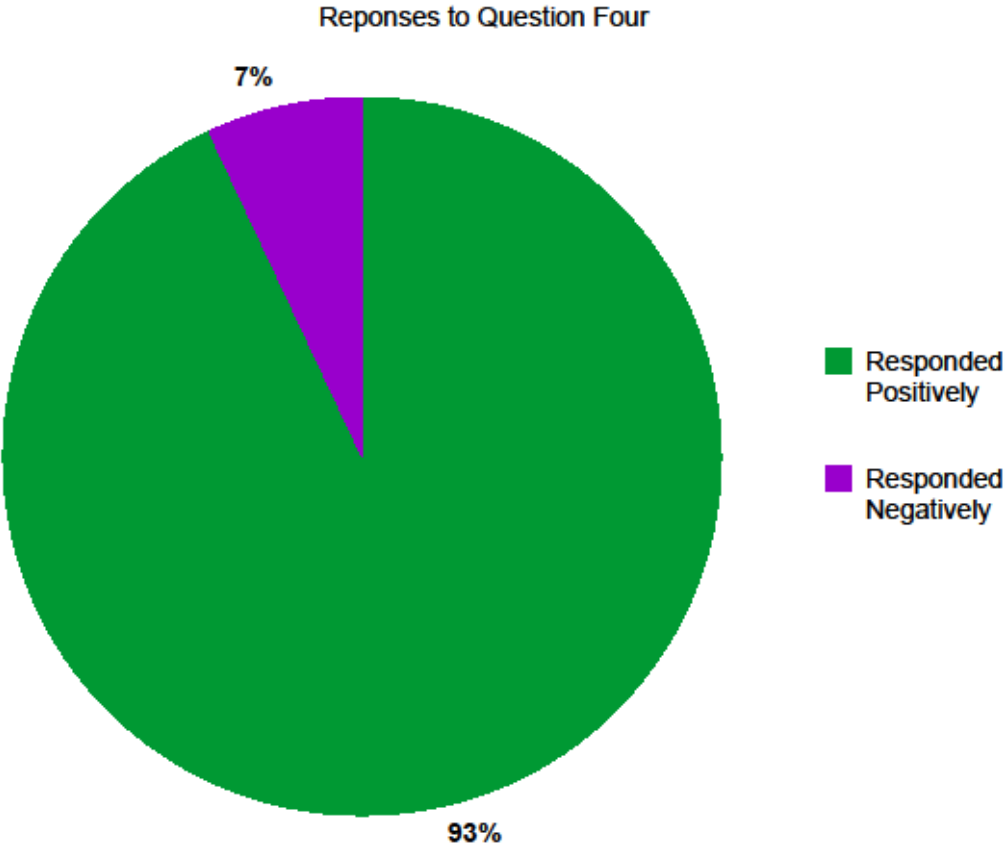
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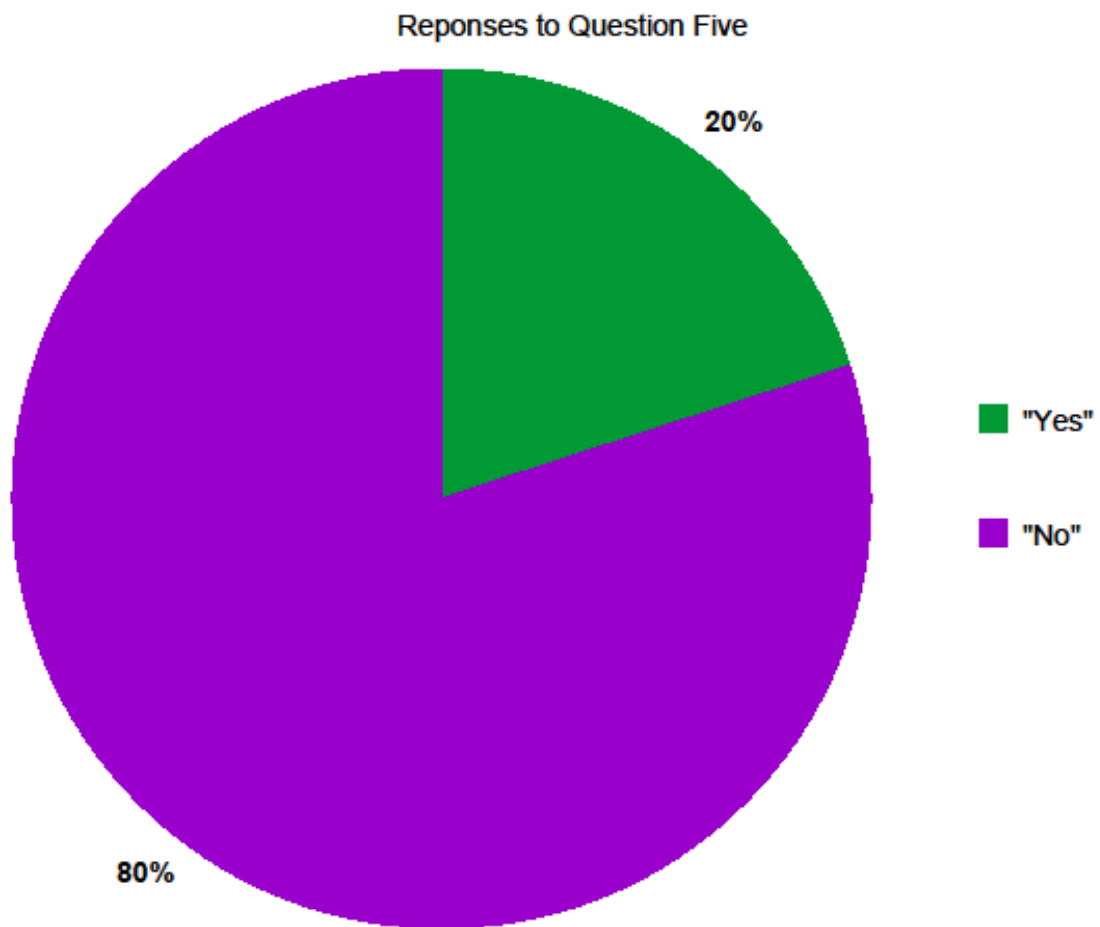
Appendix A. Parent Responses to Interview Question Three



Appendix B. Parent Responses to Interview Question Four



Appendix C. Responses to Question Five



Appendix D. Parent Responses to Interview Question Six

